

Education and the Warfighter

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"Know yourself and seek improvement," one of the Marine Corps' leadership principles, encourages young Marines to take advantage of the various opportunities to grow and develop personally and professionally. As leaders of Marines, officers and Staff Noncommissioned Officers (SNCOs) have the responsibility of fostering an environment conducive to learning, as well as providing the means for young Marines to advance themselves on and off the battlefield. One avenue in which junior Marines can further themselves is through the pursuit of a post-secondary education. Post-secondary education offers the opportunity for junior Marines to learn new skills, build upon their experiences and expand their knowledge in other areas. Marines who pursue college degrees improve themselves individually, as well as demonstrate their ability to have a positive impact on the Marine Corps. As leaders of Marines, officers and SNCOs have the inherent responsibility to promote, encourage, and facilitate post-secondary education amongst the junior ranks to strengthen the Marine Corps and retain the Corps' quality Marines.

Background

Throughout the Marine Corps, many programs and incentives exist for Marines to pursue and complete a collegiate education, yet little has been done to promote these programs. Leaders and

commanders understand the importance of off-duty education, and most commands have established policies indicating that "The Marines...are highly encouraged to seek collegiate and post-graduate education."¹ Although policy is in place, leaders do not go in depth to emphasize the value of off-duty education to the young warfighter and how such education benefits the Corps. Like policy letters, advertisements through flyers, email, and word-of-mouth have little influence on the Marines' decisions to further advance themselves academically. Promoting off-duty education and influencing young Marines goes beyond passing "the word" during morning muster; officers and SNCOs need to take a more vested interest in inciting junior Marines to attain their educational goals.

There are several opportunities and benefits for Marines to start and complete a college degree, yet these incentives are not being fully taken advantage of. Some programs include attending a local college, participating in satellite seminars, or taking on-line courses. Whether Marines are in garrison or deployed, they have the ability to choose the options which best suit them. With regard to the cost of education, funding is available to help offset the cost of higher education. This includes Tuition Assistance (TA), the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB), as well as scholarships and fellowships that can be applied for.

As a result of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, many junior enlisted Marines are now war veterans which make them eligible for additional veterans benefits that can be applied to tuition and other college fees. Although many programs and benefits are available for junior Marines, more involvement from senior leaders is required to fully exploit such opportunities.

Promoting Post-secondary Education

As leaders of Marines, officers and SNCOs have implied responsibilities to those they lead, especially with respect to education. Not only should leaders promote the idea of a college degree, but they should also encourage young Marines to pursue the education. Actively engaging Marines in their decision to attend college, supporting their short- and long-term educational goals, assisting them in balancing their schedules between work and school, and facilitating their academic needs illustrate a leader's sincere desire for his/her Marines to excel. As a result, Marines pursue a higher education and develop a sense of appreciation toward their chain of command for its support. Leaders who look out for their troops' welfare and encourage them to take advantage of all opportunities to improve will cultivate better Marines.

In his article, "Beyond the Cloister," U.S. Army General David H. Patraeus states that "...the most powerful tool any soldier carries is not his weapon but his mind."² General Patraeus contends that education is vital in the development of leadership and that "The future of the U.S. military requires that we be competent warfighters, but we cannot be competent warfighters unless we are as intelligent and mentally tough as we are aggressive and physically rugged."³ Off-duty education is a venue that allows future military leaders to expand their intellectual capacities beyond the military cloister. Post-secondary education is critical to the development of future military leaders. Encouraging young Marines to get college degrees not only makes them better warfighters, but also makes the Corps a stronger and smarter force overall.

Responsibilities of Senior Leadership

In addition to looking out for the interests of their junior Marines, officers and SNCOs should also look out for the needs of the Corps, i.e., identifying and retaining Marines with strong leadership potential. In his "Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025 Executive Summary," Marine Corps Commandant James T. Conway states that "The recruitment, training, professional education, and retention of high-quality, disciplined warriors imbued with our core values is paramount to our mission."⁴

Leaders are responsible for identifying, promoting, and retaining "quality" Marines: those who demonstrate strong leadership potential, who have the willingness to take on challenges and more responsibilities, and who exemplify the high standards of the Corps. Marines who go beyond their Military Occupation Skill (MOS) and meet training standards by pursuing a post-secondary education stand out among their peers and should be highly considered for promotion and retention.

College-bound Marines show ambition and strive to improve themselves. Senior leaders need to encourage their Marines to fulfill college goals, as well as stress the importance of their Marines in today's Corps and that of her future. All the efforts put into education contribute significantly to the unit's readiness and effectiveness, which ultimately strengthens the force.

Challenges of Pursuing Off-duty Education

There are several challenges associated with pursuing off-duty education. Although Marines who participate in these programs focus on attaining a degree, many find themselves challenged with balancing work, school, finances, family, and other immediate obligations. Given the hardships and pressures between these demands, pursuing a college education can be

discouraging. As a result, school is superseded by other obligations. When it comes to prioritizing their responsibilities, Marines will always put work before school.

Balancing the demands of college courses and everyday work requirements can be a constant struggle for Marines pursuing degrees. "The hardest part about it [attending college] is keeping up with the workloads at school and here [duty station]," states Cpl Ivelisse Colon, a Headquarters Battalion administrative clerk who is pursuing a business degree.⁵ Operational commitments, frequent deployments, and changes in duty station force a Marine to prioritize between work and school, the latter usually being sacrificed. The Marine mindset that "Mission Accomplishment" takes precedence over anything else, including a college education, drives young Marines to focus on the mission and set aside their studies. The mission always comes first, and Marines know not to let anything interfere with the primary objective.

While in combat, the mission cannot be jeopardized. In garrison, however, Marines have the opportunity to take advantage of all the programs available to reach their academic goals. To help in this endeavor, officers and SNCOs need to be better facilitators to ensure their Marines are given every

possible means to succeed in the school environment. Senior leaders have years of experience when it comes to time management, as well as setting short- and long-term objectives. Working closely with their Marines' class schedules, SNCOs can assist in deconflicting work schedules and class times. Officers, on the other hand, can implement "flextime programs," which consist of "supervisors allowing flexibility in start, stop or lunch times for the work day, so that members can both complete the hours/projects for a normal work week and attend a local college class during the daytime."⁶ Officers and SNCOs have the knowledge, experience, and discretion to best assist and manage their Marines' schedules between school and work.

Conclusion

The benefits of a college education are endless. They allow for personal development, enhance individual critical thinking skills, broaden views from other perspectives, and improve communications skills.⁷ Young Marines with aspirations to go to college and earn degrees are an asset to the Marine Corps. They have established a strong foundation for personal and professional growth, as well as demonstrate strong leadership potential as future leaders of the Corps. Officers and SNCOs must facilitate this pursuit and serve as catalysts to their Marines' educational endeavors. By having an active role in

their Marines' interests in higher learning, senior leaders not only contribute to their Marines' success, but also that of the Corps. Overall, leaders and young Marines both contribute to making the Marine Corps a stronger and smarter fighting force. In his article, "Postgraduate off-duty Education and Professional Officer Development," Maj David A. Anderson sums up the importance of off-duty education by stating,

The Corps' future success as a fighting force can be further enhanced through the intellectual development of its leaders, both officer and enlisted. Off-duty education is a vital avenue to help meet the Marine Corps' future needs, yet it will only be effective if promoted through directives and supported by individual unit commanders. In the 21st century it will not be good enough to just be warriors.⁸

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